

The cultural critics

From Matthew Arnold to Raymond Williams

Lesley Johnson

Department of Education
University of Melbourne

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Preface

This study focuses on the concept of culture employed by English literary intellectuals since the mid-nineteenth century. This concept has been central to a vital tradition of social criticism which has represented the artistic imagination as a moral force in society and as a fundamental mechanism for social change. The tradition is traced over a period of approximately 125 years through the writings of a number of English intellectuals. Their selection needs some explanation. The three main figures, Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams, elucidate most clearly the moral critique and social vision associated with the concept of culture. The other writers chosen fall into two categories: those who illustrate the various ways in which the concept of culture was employed and modified over the years; and second, the intellectuals from various areas of specialization who, though not directly associated with the literary tradition, demonstrated similar preoccupations to that tradition. The minor figures were chosen to locate the major writers in terms of the social context of other intellectuals; and further, to provide a broader survey in order to delineate the ideological and political limitations of the literary tradition associated with the concept of culture. Apart from these academic considerations, it will be obvious to the reader that the selection is also subject to my own esoteric interests, an unavoidable factor in making a choice from such a wide field.

For my continuing interest in the study I am indebted to the work of Raymond Williams. His work remains fundamental to the field of cultural studies—theoretical and concrete investigations which stem from the project associated with the literary intellectuals' concept of culture. This field of study has demonstrated the same commitment to a critique of society and a sense of engagement that infused the literary tradition. To indicate clearly my own debt (and

Preface

that of cultural studies in general) to Raymond Williams I have organized the presentation of the material of this work in a similar style to his book *Culture and Society* (1968). By doing so I have also been able to elucidate how my own approach differs from that of Raymond Williams.

I should like to acknowledge the assistance and encouragement of a number of people. In particular, I am most grateful to Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton for talking with me about my own work and theirs; Stuart Hall, Richard Johnson, Michael Green and all the people of the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies for their time and their friendliness towards me during my four-week visit there in February 1978; to Peter Musgrave for his constant support and interest in my work; to my family and friends for their warmth and encouragement; and to Martin Sullivan for his assistance, support, and above all for just being there.

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